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Qualitative findings on marketing management practices from Greek ski centers

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to discover the extent to which the marketing practices of Greek ski centers take into consideration visitors' preferences and the interests of other stakeholders in order to improve their tourism product. The existing ski centers and destinations are crucial for the ongoing development of winter tourism in Greece.

Design/methodology/approach – The study is exploratory in nature and data were collected by carrying out semi-structured in-depth interviews with key managers in 14 ski centers in Greece.

Findings – The results revealed that the majority of ski centers do not have a marketing department and only a few receive consultation from consultants. Additionally many ski centers do not use specific planning or strategic tools, and about 20 percent of their directors are not in a position to identify and measure customer segments. Individuals who pursue recreation, skiers, and various associations are ski centers' most frequent customers. Finally, respondents have defined customer satisfaction to be of a high level in those ski centers that conduct customer research.

Research limitations/implications – This is a limited exploratory study restricted to one country. Suggestions are presented for future studies and especially for generalization of the findings.

Practical implications – Today's business environment requires the application of a robust, enterprise-wide plan at Greek ski centers and particular management practices should be explored as possible causes of the inadequate advancement of the tourism product at Greek ski centers.

Originality/value – This study offers empirical findings from ski centers in Greece, where studies are limited. It also broadly creates the need for future research about this particular area and in areas with similar tourism characteristics in the Mediterranean.

Keywords Marketing practices, Ski centers, Winter tourism, Greece, Tourism, Marketing

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Tourism makes up 15 percent of the GDP of Greece and thus is a very significant factor in its economic development (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2011). Tourism in Greece is largely based around mass summer vacationing to its famous cosmopolitan islands. However, continental Greek regions with their characteristic mountainous climate at high altitude are also ideal for tourist activities like winter sports and leisure (Boniface and Cooper, 2005). In these less developed tourist mountain destinations tourism has not been a priority in the development agenda of the local authorities as well as the government (Priporas and Kamenidou, 2003). Development of these ski

centers could be a vehicle for economic development and renewed prosperity (Andronikidis *et al.*, 2006).

Recently, it has been observed that an increasing number of visitors wish to participate in ski-related activities, this has increased the demand for new and modern ski centers, and reinforced competition to attract potential customers (Barlas *et al.*, 2010). According to the Association of Greek Ski Tourism (2010) approximately 500,000 tickets are purchased by skiers, with a turnover of €50 million per year. Additionally, it has been estimated that around 350,000 people are involved in skiing activities more than six times a year. However, the ski industry in Greece is in the early stages of development and is basically concerned with domestic tourism (Boniface and Cooper, 2005). Skiing activities appeared in the late 1960s in Greece, with the establishment and operation of the first ski-centers (Maniatis, 2008; Drakou *et al.*, 2005).

Given the fact that a limited number of studies have focused on Greek ski centers (Priporas *et al.*, 2009) and especially the marketing practices of ski centers, this topic constitutes an interesting research theme. The purpose of this study is to explore the extent to which the marketing practices of the ski centers take under consideration visitors' preferences and the interests of other stakeholders in order to improve their tourism product. More specifically the objectives are threefold and aim to identify:

- (1) the ski centers' visitors (e.g. skiers, associations, families, etc.) and the percentage that corresponds to each visitor's category;
- (2) the organization of marketing activities at ski centers (research, promotion, collaborations, pricing, HR management and procedures); and
- (3) the interest of ski centers management in monitoring the degree of visitors' satisfaction.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. In the next section we briefly review the literature on tourism product destinations' management at ski centers. Thereafter, we describe the research methodology and discuss our findings. Finally, we conclude our paper with a summary, a discussion of the limitations of our approach and some directions for future research.

The administration of destinations' tourism product

According to Pretes (1995), the tourist consumes images or representations of a society, with tourism evolving to a packaged commodity. Kotler *et al.* (1993) determine the analysis of tourism product as a four-level-approach procedure. In the case of ski-centers, at the first level of the core tourism product it is the unique experience of skiing and in general the winter sports that play a significant role. This is also supported by McCannell (1989) who suggests that that tourists look for authentic experiences of other places and times. The second level consists of important services, such as customers' transportation and lifts, lodgings and accommodation. A point that should be given particular focus at this second level is that ski centers managers and tourism marketing specialists should emphasize not only the quantitative aspects of the resort (e.g. length of slopes and total lift capacity) but also the qualitative aspects (e.g. speed of lifts) (Falk, 2008). Support services take place at the third level, e.g. retail trading and all kinds of shops. The traditional or modern image of the ski-destination stands at the fourth level of this analysis, due to the visitors impressions of the tourism-destination

and facilities in general during their period of stay. For example, as Lovelock, comments “nobody wants to be at Disney World on a record-breaking day for ticket sales” (Pullman and Thompson, 2002).

Ski-destination tourism attracts not only the active visitors who participate in sports activities but also the passive visitors who observe various events, visit athletic museums and enjoy being at a wonderful place (Gibson, 2002; Pitts, 1999). A lack of necessary infrastructure facilities inhibiting the accommodation of tourists should be seriously taken under consideration, preferably aimed at increasing the visitors’ duration of stay, rather than trying to increase the number of visitors, which would actually be more difficult to get successfully done by management (Ritchie, 2005).

Similarly, the experience of being in a highly crowded ski-destination can possibly cause physical and psychological fatigue to the visitors waiting in long lines for the lifts, or at the restaurants waiting for the first available table, noise, etc. However, research being done in New Zealand has shown that not even 25 percent of the ski-event-organizers conduct sole strategic plans for each of the sports activities and events being organized at that country’s winter destinations (Higham and Ritchie, 2001). According to Pullman and Thompson (2002), ski-centers should be regarded as “service networks that offer multiple services and activities at one site. Service networks face more – complex capacity – management decisions than do services with a single service offering” (p. 26). The complexity in tuning and organizing service networks is due to diachronical changes in visitors’ preferences, availability in time for activities and other services, physical constraints, and space limitations.

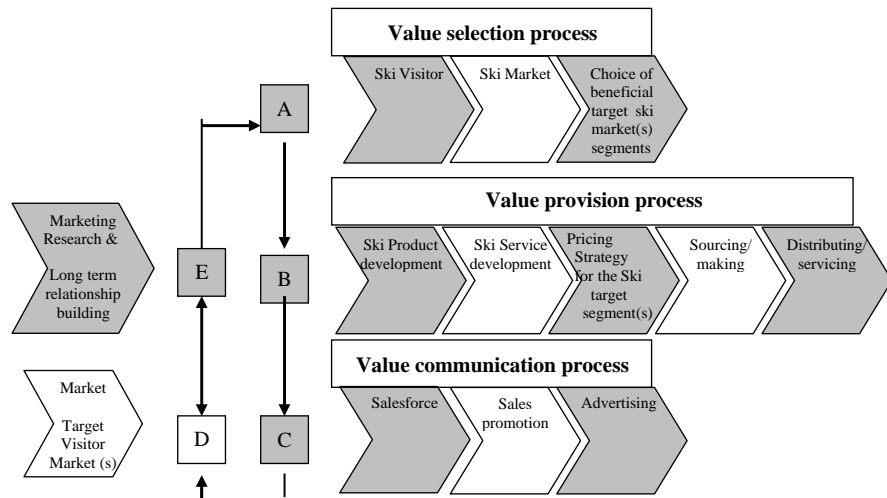
However, it must be pointed out that ski centers managers often operate in uncertain conditions. For example, they are uncertain about what leisure activities clients will actually choose or if the weather will cause travel problems to their destinations. Ski and other winter sports are reliant on climatic resources and weather (Scott, 2006; Gomez-Martin, 2005).

Marketing concept and value creation

The central task of ski management must be to find improved ways of organizing what they supply based on the needs of customers (Doyle and Stern, 2006). The marketing concept supports the development of business strategies and practices which start with the analysis of visitor needs and desires, then with choosing the type of needs to satisfy, and finally with engaging the management and the resources of the ski centers in the long-term procedure of keeping the visitors satisfied (Cravens and Piercy, 2006).

Based on this theory the marketing management oriented approaches include business actions like the following. The ski centers begin the analysis of their markets by segmenting the ski market and recognizing the needs and desires of their visitors. Second, they build up strategies based on the choice of beneficial target ski market segments. Following the procedure of ski market segment benefit identification a cross operational and functional approach is required to more efficiently match the benefits of the targeting. Also, the sales staff and the promotional activities must enforce the promotion of the visitor value(s) to the ski target market(s). After all, the ski centers must search for alternative ways to build long-term relationships with their target market ski destination visitors (Doyle and Stern, 2006) (Figure 1).

Figure 1.
Marketing concept and
value creation; the case
of ski destination
management



Source: Based and adopted from Doyle and Stern (2006, p. 411)

Research methodology

Taking into consideration the exploratory nature of the study and the scarcity of studies on ski tourism in Greece, qualitative research is considered a necessity (Priporas, 2005). Qualitative research provides insights into, and understanding of, the problem, and quantitative research must be preceded by appropriate qualitative research whenever a new market research problem is being addressed (Malhotra, 2007). Also, qualitative research methods are well-suited to the characteristics and the nature of services (Gilmore and Carson, 1996). The qualitative approach in tourism has proved to be a useful approach to developing data on relationships of interest (Goodson and Phillimore, 2004; Saunders *et al.*, 2003). Several researchers in the tourism discipline are calling for greater use of qualitative research (McIntosh and Thyne, 2005; Riley and Love, 2000; Walle, 1997). Thus, recently an increasing number of studies as an alternative to the more traditional quantitative approach, use qualitative techniques (Slevitch, 2011). Qualitative research has been defined by the use of small samples and developing deeper insight into people's perspectives on particular problems, rather than focusing on the number of people who may share a perspective (De Ruyter and Scholl, 1998). In other words, qualitative research tries to understand a particular phenomenon rather than uncover causal relationships.

For the purpose of this study, in depth interviews with 14 managers, who represent the management bodies in charge of the 14 ski resorts, were used as a data collection tool. The number of participant managers is considered sufficient for data collection in this study since the literature indicates the use of small samples (Christy and Wood, 1999; De Ruyter and Scholl, 1998). According to Patton (2002, p. 244) "there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry". Additionally, scholars suggest that the value of samples should be based on their ability to provide important and insightful information, not because they are indicative of the perspectives of a larger group (Hellström, 2008; Walsh, 2003). The experience of the selected interviewees in ski resorts

management, as well as their participation or influence in decision making processes have been regarded as important selection criteria for the current research. According to Bryman and Cramer (1990), the objective of qualitative analysis is to be able to see things through the eyes of those being investigated. In particular, the ability to gain deeper information is one of the main explanations for the increasing interest in qualitative approaches among business leaders today (Cooper and Schindler, 2011).

For the in depth interviews, a simple semi-structured questionnaire was developed on the basis of the literature. The interviews were held at places and at times that were selected by the interviewees after a telephone call. The interview's duration ranged from between 46 and 67 minutes in length. Before each interview there was a briefing about the purpose of the research, the ways data were intended to be analyzed and the fact that all answers would be digitally recorded with the conform opinion of the interviewees. Additionally, the managers had the possibility to get prepared and take a look at the thematic of the interview, through a leaflet which was distributed before the interviews.

The transcription interview form is comprised of three important thematic areas of discussion. The first one focuses on the operation characteristics of ski centers, the second is related to the administrative and management philosophy, and the third area contains marketing-related issues. The transcription form of the answers is based on a semi-structured questionnaire, meaning that acceptance or rejection of the proposition comes as a result of answering explanatory questions on behalf of the interviewees (Horton *et al.*, 2004; Houtkoop-Steenstra, 1996). Interview as a method of research with the use of semi-structured questionnaire facilitates the extraction of conclusions for comparing and analyzing the answers. For the data analysis, the content analysis technique was employed for the open-ended answers (Krippendorff, 1980). All answers were translated into the English language and inserted in an SPSS package with coding taking place as a means of frequency analysis.

The research proposition

Based on the literature, we carried on with the formulation of this research proposition (RP) regarding management practices at ski centers:

- RP.* Ski centers' management take under consideration customers' preferences and the interests of other stakeholders in order to improve the product being offered.

The RP contains characteristic elements of the three important thematic fields of tourism research, namely administration and strategy, marketing and marketing planning, and operations (Baloglu and Assante, 1999; Crawford-Welch and McCleary, 1992; Chon *et al.*, 1989). Table I shows a correlation between the RP and the criteria of description and explanatory questions focus analysis.

Sample profile

There are 22 active ski centers open during the winter season in Greece (www.gtp.gr/skicenters.asp, 2009), meaning that they present intensive seasonal characteristics. The 14 ski centers that were selected to participate in the research sample make up about 63.6 percent of the total number of existing facilities in Greece and they represent the traditional ski destinations in the country. Most of them (83.3 percent of the

Table I.
Relation between the RP
and the criteria of
description and focus
analysis

Description criteria	References	Explanatory questions
Visitor segments	Boniface and Cooper (2005)	How are ski-center's customers described (e.g. athletes, recreation visitors, tourism agents, educational institutions, families, etc.)? What is the percentage that corresponds to each visitor's category identified?
Target markets	Ritchie (2005)	
Marketing activities	Buhalis (2000)	
Visitor satisfaction	Avlonitis and Gounaris (1999)	
	Kotler <i>et al.</i> (1993)	How are the marketing activities at ski centers (research, promotion, collaborations, pricing, HR management and procedures) organized?
	Deshpande <i>et al.</i> (1993)	
	Getz (1992)	
	Ryan (1991)	In what ways do ski center management track the degree of visitors' satisfaction? How do you evaluate the satisfaction of your customers?
	Kohli and Jaworski (1990)	
	Narver and Slater (1990)	
	Haywood (1986)	
	Butler (1980)	
Note: RP: ski center's management take under consideration customers' preferences and interests of other stakeholders to improve the product being offered		

researched ski centers) are members of the Greek Ski Center Association (GSCA). The professional position of each manager, executive is presented in Table II.

Findings

According to the perceptions of ski centers managers, all efforts result in the attraction of specific customer segments. For the development of marketing programs, there are actions based on the good allocation of activities and available resources. In some ski centers there is evaluation of the degree of customer satisfaction in planning future marketing activities. The main customer segments identified at Greek ski centers, the appreciated degree of customer satisfaction, as well as resource allocation are presented next. The resource allocation is performed per marketing mix element, in order to develop and accomplish the marketing plans. Table III presents an overall picture of the current findings.

Responsible for marketing actions

Interviewees were asked to specify those entities, e.g. individuals, companies or groups that are responsible for the formulation and support of marketing plans. The vast majority of ski centers are not supported by a responsible unit for the management and administration of marketing activities. Almost 36 percent of managers did not provide any answer about this issue, meaning that in the corresponding ski centers nobody is formally in charge of marketing management. Almost one-third of ski centers, that took part in our research, entrust their marketing activities to business or marketing consultants. At three out of 14 ski centers, the boards of directors are responsible for marketing decisions, while just a few of them execute their planned marketing activities through individual investors, sports unions, development offices or other teams of people, who specialise in marketing planning. The following statements are very characteristic:

When the time comes to decide about implementing advertising campaigns and deciding the prices of our services, we prefer to ask for help from professionals and offices that carry the necessary experience so that every euro is well spent (Ski resort 1, director).

Ski resort or center	Professional stand of the administration officer	Institutional management body of ski center
PF	Ski center director	Prefecture of Florina
PM	Ski resort director and Ski center equipment manager	Development Company of Magnesia
PN	Ski resort director	Municipality of Naoussa and Municipal Enterprise for the Tourist Dev. of Naoussa
PT	General manager of ski center-mechanical engineer	Development Company of Prefecture of Trikala (ANENT S.A.) and Municipality of Aithikon
PA	Financial and procurement manager of ski center	Hellenic Tourism Development Co
KK	Vice-president of the alpine and ski club of Karditsa	Alpine and ski club of Karditsa
MI	Member of the Board of Directors in Municipal Enterprise of Metsovo	Municipal Developmental Enterprise of Metsovo
LS	Manager of the ski center and secretary of the Hellenic Alpine Club (HAC) of Serres	The Board of Directors of HAC of Serres and the General Secretariat for Athletics
VK	President of Ski – Alpine Club of Kastoria	Ski – Alpine Club of Kastoria
KE	Deputy CEO of Development Company of Prefecture of Evrytania	The Board of Prefecture of Evrytania
KA	Director of the Municipal Enterprise of Kalavryta	Municipal Enterprise, Klaoudatos, Everest
KP	Director of ski center	Prefecture of Pella and Board of Directors of Development Company EUROAP S.A.
EP	General director of ski center	Ski Centre Elatochori Pierias S.A.
VG	Ex-president of the board of directors of Vasilitsa Ski center (civil servant of Prefecture of Grevena, Department for Culture and People's Heritage)	General Secretariat for Athletics

Notes: Where PF – Pisoderi Florinas, PM – Piliou Magnisias, PN – 3-5 Pigadia Imathias, PT – Pertouli Trikalon, PA – Parnassos Viotias, KK – Karamanoli Karditsas, MI – Metsovou Ioanninon, LS – Lailias Serron, VK – Vitsi Kastorias, KE – Karpenisiou Euritanias, KA – Kalavriton Achaïas, KP – Kaimaktsalan Pellis, EP – Elatochoriou Pierias and VG – Vasilitsas Grevenon

Table II.
Ski centers and corresponding administration officers that participated in the semi-structured interviews

The center is actually run by our alpine club. So, every important decision that affects operations, relations and promotions, except for financial indices and prices, is taken by the board of directors and members exclusively (Ski resort 9, president).

Marketing actions: destination, product, services and infrastructure

At this point in the survey, managers were asked to indicate those who provide the service of upgrading the destinations and the ski centers as tourism products. Concerning tourism product planning, it is a combination of services and environmental material elements. Planning, both of services and that of material elements and management of resources and products elements, does not exist in Greek ski centers.

Table III.
Description of customer segments, the perceived degree of customer satisfaction and the management of various corporate actions, concerning the division of labor at the elements of the marketing mix

Ski center	Customer segments (rates are based on perceptions)	Marketing actions (MA)	Customer satisfaction
		(a) Responsible for MA (b) Destination, product, services and infrastructure (c) Pricing (d) Place, distribution (e) Promotion (f) People-staff	
PF	(a) Associations: 20 percent (b) Individuals for recreation: 20 percent (c) Skiers: 10 percent, travel agencies: 10 percent, institutions (e.g. schools, universities): 40 percent(c)	(a) Research team of the ski center, advertising and pricing team, and development offices and consultants (b) Development offices and consultants (c) Development offices and consultants (d) Development offices and consultants (e) Development offices and consultants (f) Development offices and consultants	Very high (based on research)
PM	(a) Associations: NA (b) Individuals recreation: NA (c) Skiers: NA, travel agencies: NA, institutions (e.g. schools, universities): NA	(a) NA (b) NA (c) NA (d) NA (e) NA (f) NA	NA
PN	(a) Associations: 13 percent (b) Individuals for recreation: 90 percent (c) Skiers: 3 percent, travel agencies: 3 percent, institutions (e.g. schools, universities): 1 percent	(a) NA (b) NA (c) NA (d) NA (e) NA (f) NA	(Very high) based on research
PT	(a) Associations: 10 percent (b) Individuals for recreation: 80 percent (c) Skiers: 10 percent	(a) Consultant from external marketing office (b) Consultants (c) Consultants (d) Consultants (e) Consultants (f) Consultants	NA

(continued)

Ski center	Customer segments (rates are based on perceptions)	Marketing actions (MA)	Customer satisfaction
PA	(a) Associations: 13 percent (b) Individuals for recreation: 12 percent (c) Skiers: 50 percent, travel agencies: 13 percent, institutions (e.g. schools, universities): 12 percent	(a) NA (b) NA (c) NA (d) NA (e) NA (f) NA	Very high (based on research)
KK	(a) Associations: 95 percent (b) Individuals for recreation: 3 percent (c) Skiers: 2 percent	(a) Consultant from external marketing office (b) NA (c) NA (d) NA (e) Development offices (f) NA	NA
MI	(a) Associations: 13 percent (b) Individuals for recreation: 70 percent (c) Skiers: 10 percent, travel agencies: 20 percent	(a) Individual investors (b) Development offices, consultants, free professionals from the private sector (c) Consultants, advertising offices, free local professionals (d) Local free professionals, travel agencies (e) Advertising agencies, travel agencies (f) Our self "in-house"	High (based on research)
LS	(a) Associations: 5 percent (b) Individuals for recreation: 60 percent (c) Skiers: 5 percent, travel agencies: 20 percent, institutions (e.g. schools, universities): 10 percent	(a) NA (b) Board of directors (c) Board of directors (d) Board of directors (e) Board of directors (f) Board of directors	No research

(continued)

Table III.

Ski center	Customer segments (rates are based on perceptions)	Marketing actions (MA)	Customer satisfaction
VK	(a) Associations: 10 percent (b) Individuals for recreation: 50 percent (c) Skiers: 40 percent	(a) Sport association members (b) Board of directors (c) Accountant office and board of directors (d) Board of directors (e) Board of directors (f) Board of directors	High (based on research)
KE	(a) Associations: – (b) Individuals for recreation: – (c) Skiers: –, travel agencies: –, institutions (e.g. schools, universities): –	(a) Board of directors (b) NA (c) NA (d) NA (e) NA (f) NA	High (based on research)
KP	(a) Associations: 25 percent (b) Individuals for recreation: 20 percent (c) Skiers: 40 percent, travel agencies: 15 percent	(a) Individual investors (b) Staff from other EU ski centers (c) Accountant office (d) Consultants (e) Board of directors (f) Other EU ski center partners	Very High (based on research)
KP	(a) Associations: – (b) Individuals for recreation: 26 percent (c) Skiers: – travel agencies: – institutions (e.g. schools, universities): –	(a) Consultant from external marketing office (b) NA (c) Consultants (d) Travel agencies (e) Our self-experience through personal contact with customers (f) Board of directors	High (based on research)

(continued)

Ski center	Customer segments (rates are based on perceptions)	Marketing actions (MA)	Customer satisfaction
EP	(a) Associations: – (b) Individuals for recreation: 26 percent (c) Skiers: 74 percent	(a) Board of directors (b) NA (c) Accountant office (d) Travel agencies (e) Advertising (f) NA	Very High (based on research)
VG	(a) Associations: 80 percent (b) Individuals for recreation: 18 percent (c) Skiers: 2 percent	(a) Board of directors (b) NA (c) NA (d) NA (e) NA (f) NA	No research

Notes: Where PF – Pisoderi Florinas, PM – Piliou Magnisias, PN – 3-5 Pigadia Imathias, PT – Pertouli Trikalon, PA – Parnassos Viotias, KK – Karamanoli Karditsas, MI – Metsovou Ioanninon, LS – Lailias Serron, VK – Vitsi Kastorias, KE – Karpenisiou Euritanias, KP – Kalavriton Pelloponisou, KP – Kaimaktsalan Pellis, EP – Elatochriou Pierias and VG – Vasilitsas Grevenon; where “NA” – no answer

Another observation, arising from managers' answers, is that in most ski centers there is no qualified unit responsible for executing marketing plans. Almost 57 percent of the ski centers-managers that participated in the survey have not indicated the medium through which destination marketing is implemented. At ski centers where a clear answer has been given, destination marketing is mainly assigned to business consultants, development offices and the board of directors and in a few cases is based on cooperation with other European ski centers or other free lancers in the private sector.

Marketing actions: pricing

Due to the increased importance of pricing, being the only revenue generating element of the marketing mix, managers were specifically asked about how they make decisions about it. According to their answers, the planning process of pricing policy and distribution activities are mainly based on collaborations with:

- business consultants; and
- accounting offices.

Some of the researched ski centers produce their pricing policies based on decisions by the board of directors and at a few of them various freelance professionals and advertising agencies deal with the pricing procedure. However, at 35 percent of the ski centers pricing has not attracted the attention it deserves.

Marketing actions: place: distribution

Another important parameter of marketing is the placement of ski centers' as tourism-destinations. Therefore, it is of utmost importance for the managers to select the right channels of distribution. Almost 43 percent of ski centers do not activate a distribution planning procedure, which is a result of the weakness of specific managers in dealing with this issue. Tourism agencies are the most frequent preference of ski centers in order to distribute their services to prospective visitors and in a few cases the boards of directors get involved in the distribution process.

Marketing actions: promotion

Promotional activities are necessary for ski centers, because they try to attract customers from great distances who mostly live in urban areas. The selection of the right promotion medium is crucial for the success of promotional activities. Promotion, as part of the marketing mix procedure, is controlled in most of the cases by:

- the board of directors; and
- independent consultants or consulting firms.

Advertising firms make up 15 percent of the answers and the use of word-of-mouth communication has been mentioned just once. Again, a considerable percentage of the sample has not provided the research team with information about the entity that has been assigned the promotional activities, although the interviewers insisted on it.

Marketing actions: people and staff

The execution of the selected marketing actions is probably as important as the planning procedure. A successful execution depends on the knowledge (know-how) and dedication of the marketing partner. In general, human resources planning for

executing marketing actions does not appear to be an active marketing procedure. A ski center has decided to cooperate with other EU ski centers and at three of them the board of directors has undertaken this task!

Market segments

Another crucial part of our analysis was to reveal all different customer segments that actually support the rates of visits to Greek ski centers. Therefore, the percentages from all ski centers and for every active customer segment were added up and the results are as follows and also presented in Table III. The active segment “Individuals for recreation” is ranked first (score 349), followed by category “Skiers” (score 249), “Associations” (score 154), “Tour offices” (score 81) and the last is the active segment “Institutions” (score 63). Some representatives of specific ski centers did not provided the interviewers with any active customer segments, apparently due to their lack of knowledge about the profile of their visitors.

Customer satisfaction

The following extracts demonstrated this view:

“According to qualitative research in 2008, almost 75 per cent of our visitors were more than satisfied with our ski center’s services and amenities” (Ski resort 3, director):

Every year we randomly select a number of visitors which corresponds to about 5 per cent of our arrivals and ask them, with the use of a simple questionnaire, to evaluate our services, report any complaints, and tell us about their overall feeling and experience of their stay at our ski center. On a steady basis, more than 7 out of 10 visitors declare to be highly satisfied (Ski resort 12, director).

A different response was given by another manager:

We have not conducted any kind of research in the past to check the levels of satisfaction of our visitors, but in general we have not encountered any unsolvable problems or complaints (Ski resort 8, manager).

Figure 2 shows a synopsis of the findings based on the marketing concept and value creation.

Conclusions

Marketing activities seems to be a vital factor for survival and success in today’s turbulent and highly competitive tourism industry. Tourism executives, in order to influence and motivate visitors to choose their tourism product, should provide a well designed action program consisting of a suitable mix of marketing activities (Hudson, 2008). The purpose of this study was to shed some light on issues concerning the marketing actions taking by Greek ski centers. The results revealed that the majority of ski centers do not have a marketing department and only few receive consultation from consultants. Additionally many ski centers do not use specific planning or strategic tools, and about 20 percent of their directors are not in a position to identify and measure customer segments. Individuals who pursue recreation, skiers and various associations are ski centers’ most frequent customers. Based on managers’ perceptions, there is great room for the development of the active segments of organized groups of visitors, and that could happen only with the development of a more robust marketing culture. Customer satisfaction is reported to be at high levels in general, but it is necessary to further

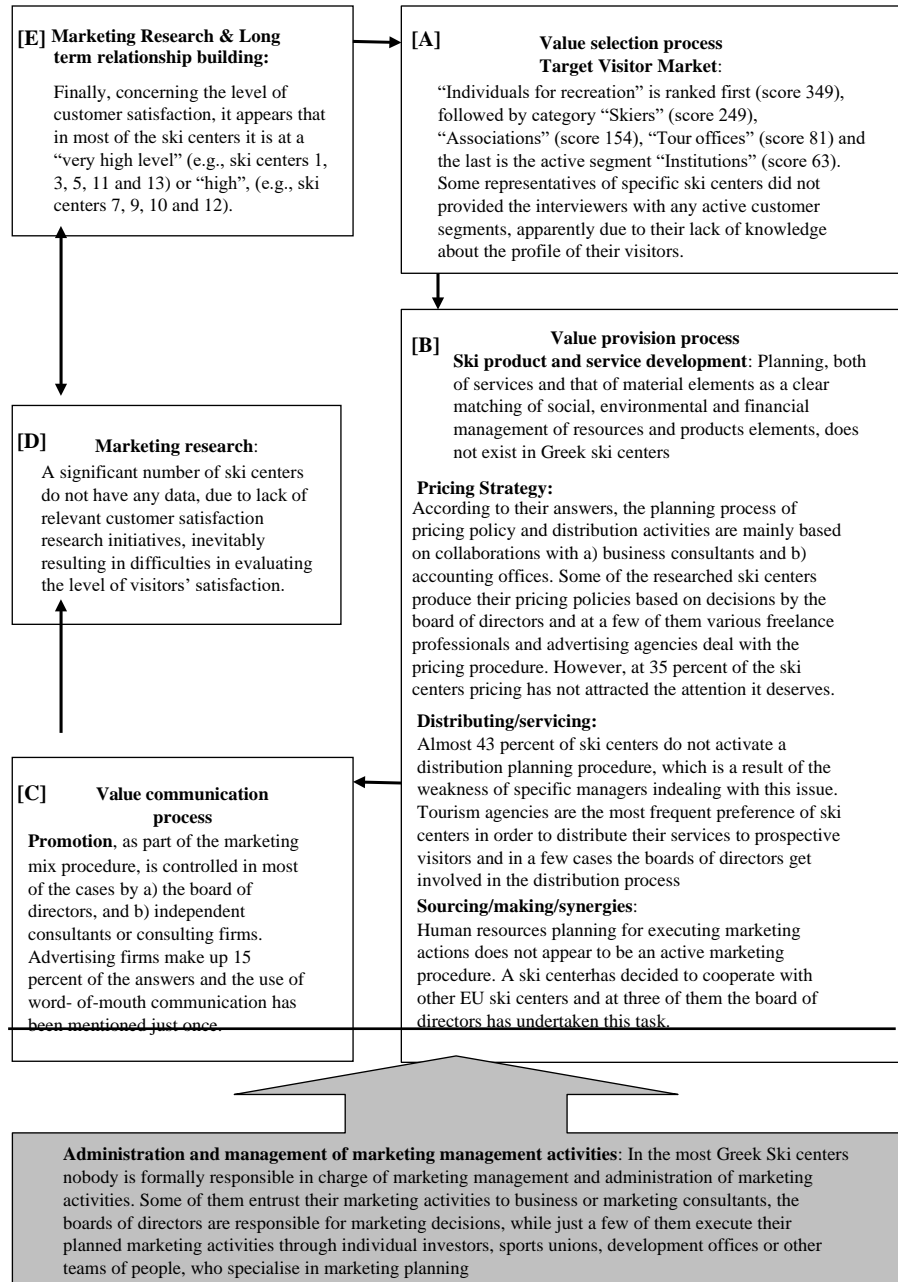


Figure 2.
Marketing concept and value creation; the results of our Greek ski destination management study

investigate this particular area with more analytical research, in order to come up with more specific conclusions. Past studies (Matzler *et al.*, 2008; Fuchs, 2004) highlighted that the measurement of customer satisfaction levels is crucial for destination management (i.e. ski center) in order to identify the drivers of customer satisfaction, and develop the appropriate strategies to maintain and increase satisfaction. Thus, many ski resorts monitor satisfaction on a regular basis (Perdue, 2002).

The low motivation of human resources and the absence of modern management practices should be investigated as possible causes of the inadequate advancement of the tourism product at many of the existing Greek ski centers. Perhaps, the state business model – that governs the majority of ski centers in Greece – should be challenged. Modern resorts (i.e. ski centers) that employ determined, open-minded, and visionary marketing strategies that offer a one off experience, value for money, added value, individually tailored packaging and promotions, and consumer choice, among other competitive product attributes, will advance fastest. This will, however, demand more complete and dependable information based on proper long-term strategic planning and decision making (Chon and Singh, 1995).

This study is one of the few which has focused on the ski centers in Greece. Although it makes a contribution to ski tourism, it should be acknowledged that this study was qualitative in nature, and as such, the results need to be verified through extended research. In addition, more research to understand the current condition of Greek ski center marketing programs is needed. The present research referred to 14 out of 22 Greek ski centers, which implies that in the future the incorporation of the remaining eight ski centers would make up the complete picture, relative to the research questions. Nevertheless, the repetition of the same work in a future point of time, even at only these 14 ski centers, would definitely help the respondent validation of the results (Lacey and Luff, 2001). Despite the current limitations, the present study could be a first step towards a better understanding of marketing actions in Greek ski centers where very little research has been done. Future studies can build on these results to complete this picture at the national level and compare it with other destinations with similar tourism characteristics in the Mediterranean area. Finally, previous conclusions could be cross-checked with similar research with the use of questionnaires aimed at capturing visitors' opinions and beliefs about their overall satisfaction while staying at Greek ski centers and their perceptions concerning ski centers' marketing initiatives.

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Further reading

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